

Why Garland Jeffreys

Garland Jeffreys
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by Peter Stone Brown

So at this point it's kind of ridiculous that after playing for four or five decades and showing – actually not showing but proving long ago that he's up there with any of the poetic songwriters you care to name that Garland Jeffreys is still playing clubs to small audiences. But then again, if he was playing some big arena or even a moderate size theater, I probably wouldn't have seen the show I saw tonight.

Music journalists have always known about Jeffreys, and musicians know about him, and the people who know about him know about him, and in some countries in Europe, they *really* know about him, but in his home country, except for a brief period in the late '70s and early '80s, when he managed to get some airplay, most people don't know about him.

Tonight in Philly, he came on while his excellent four-piece band set up a hard groove and started the show by introducing the band, and talking casual as if he was in a living room, but at 70, he was rocking harder than a lot of bands and singers half his age, and maybe even the half of the half, with the hardest track from his new album, *Truth Serum*, "Crash The Generations" which is as much of a poem as it is a song, and then followed that up with the just as hard opener from his previous album, *The King of In Between*, "Coney Island Winter," and then followed that with one of those songs that made it onto radio, a little more than three decades ago, "35 Millimeter Dreams," and almost immediately he's off the stage and into the audience, walking up to tables and singing and then back on stage and in between he's carrying on this kind of casual conversation with the audience almost as if he's not the guy performing onstage.

And meanwhile the band, Adam Roth, guitar; Charlie Roth, keyboard, Brian Stanley, bass and Charlie Curiano drums was pretty much smoking from the beginning, maybe a little rough at first, and so hard and loud that you wonder how they're gonna pull off the softer stuff. And meanwhile Jeffreys is introducing another song from his new album, and another rocker, "Is This The Real World," before shifting gears into one of the defining songs of who he is, from his greatest album, *Ghost Writer*, the brilliant exercise into reggae, "I May Not Be Your Kind," and it's defining because Jeffreys is part black and part

Puerto Rican and it was a hard hitting song when it first appeared and it hits just as hard three decades later, and when he sings that song, he's singing every day of his life. And it's at this point, how good this band is just kicks in because they nail it, and then it's back to two songs from *King of In Between*, "The Contortionist" and " 'Til John Lee Hooker Calls Me," a song done to a Hooker boogie groove where he puts his love of music, name checking quite a few of his musical heroes as kind of a mystical barrier between him and the inevitable.

And then he goes back to his album, *Escape Artist*, and pulls out "Mystery Kids," and in the middle, it's story time, and he's talking, acting out living in a six-floor walk-up, and being a kid, and he could see the el train from the window bring home his father from work, and his father would walk up the stairs, and the drummer is doing that slow walk up the stairs and how his father would come in, and grab him by the collar and beat him, and as that's sinking in, he's talking about how he's talked about that with his wife, how he's lived that everyday, and how his wife showed him told him how he could have a different kind of family now, but the way he transitioned from bad to good, well only a contortionist could pull that off.

And between all of it is this conversation with the audience and then he straps on an acoustic guitar and does one of his best songs, "New York Skyline," which is also one of the best songs about New York, but he's taking the song out further, kind of the way Van Morrison takes his songs out further and he's naming all the buildings in the skyline, including the ones that aren't there. And then it's back to the new album for "Ship of Fools," another change in mood, before ending with the key song, from the new album, "Any Rain," which contains these lines:

*Tears are runnin' all down my face
But only for a little while
I was thinkin' about the human race
And wishin' we could reconcile*

And after a break of a few seconds, they're back onstage, and Jeffreys is apologizing, saying, he doesn't feel like he's on his game tonight, and the reaction of the audience is a collective, *what!?* And he straps on the acoustic and does a great version of what well may be his masterpiece, "Spanish Town," and then a couple of more songs, and he's looking through this book of lyrics on a music stand, and he suddenly shouts out, "Hard Rain," and wham, he's into this incredibly funky version of "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall," that's sort of reminiscent of Leon Russell's version in that the piano is half gospel and half blues, and slide guitar, except I look over the guitar player's getting a

slide sound without using a slide, using Les Paul Gibson sustain, and sometimes he's looking at the lyrics and other times, he's roaming the stage the way he did the entire night, and he chants out the last verse like the poem the song really is and it was probably one of the best Bob Dylan covers I saw in my life.

And then he closed the show which was now easily over two hours long with his one big hit, "96 Tears," of course a cover, but he now owns it, and again he went down into the audience, and the song ended with him in the audience. And instead of running backstage to a dressing room, he just stayed there saying hello to the audience he just performed for.

And yeah, if there was justice in the world and justice in the music business, Garland Jeffreys would be playing the big halls and packing them in and a whole more people would know about him, but I wouldn't have seen the show I saw tonight.